

Avondale College

**ResearchOnline@Avondale**

---

Theology Papers and Journal Articles

Faculty of Theology

---

Fall 2014

## "Call Up Samuel": Who Appeared to the Witch at En-Dor? (1 Sam 28:3-25)

Grenville J. Kent

Avondale College of Higher Education, [grenville@rema.tv](mailto:grenville@rema.tv)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://research.avondale.edu.au/theo\\_papers](https://research.avondale.edu.au/theo_papers)



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kent, G. J. R. (2014). "Call Up Samuel": Who appeared to the Witch at En-Dor? (1 Sam 28:3-25). *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 52(2), 141-160. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/auss/>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty of Theology at ResearchOnline@Avondale. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology Papers and Journal Articles by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@Avondale. For more information, please contact [alicia.starr@avondale.edu.au](mailto:alicia.starr@avondale.edu.au).

## **“CALL UP SAMUEL”: WHO APPEARED TO THE WITCH AT EN-DOR? (1 SAMUEL 28:3-25)<sup>1</sup>**

GRENVILLE J. R. KENT  
Cooranbong, Australia

Boy: Are you a good witch or a bad witch?

Endora: Comme ça, comme ça.

-TV series *Bewitched*

The dark narrative of Saul's night visit to the witch at En-Dor has intrigued readers for millennia. One key interpretive question is the identity of the figure who appeared to the medium and spoke to Saul. Was it the *post mortem* Samuel or a demon impersonating Samuel in order to deceive Saul?<sup>2</sup> Historically, Jewish and Christian interpreters have been divided on the question.<sup>3</sup>

The view that the figure was Samuel has been held by one group of interpreters at least since Joshua ben Sirach: "And after this he [Samuel] slept, and he made known to the king, and shewed him the end of his life, and he lifted up his voice from the earth in prophecy to blot out the wickedness of the nation" (Ecclesiasticus 46:16-23). Arnold observes that some of this group regarded Samuel as a "disembodied soul" while others thought he had a "resuscitated physical body." "Some of the interpreters in this category appear to have worked from a specifically dualist anthropology, but others apparently assumed a resuscitated physical body, perhaps not unlike the resurrection body of Jesus."<sup>4</sup> For example, Josephus thought only the soul of Samuel appeared from Hades, equating the Greco-Roman view of the underworld with the Sheol of the Old Testament<sup>5</sup> while Augustine, by contrast, compared Samuel's appearance at En-Dor to that of Moses on the

<sup>1</sup>A version of this paper was presented at the BRI Jerusalem Bible Conference in June 2012, and the author thanks those present for their feedback, particularly Dr. Richard M. Davidson.

<sup>2</sup>There are of course various other views, for example a rationalist reading that views the 'ghost' as a product of trickery and Saul's conversation with it as reflecting the conflict in his own head. See Fred Blumenthal, "The Ghost of Samuel: Real or Imaginary?" *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (2013): 104-106.

<sup>3</sup>See K.A.D. Smelik, "The Witch of Endor: 1 Samuel 28 in Rabbinic and Christian Exegesis till 800A.D.," *Vigilae Christianae* 33 (1979): 160-179.

<sup>4</sup>Bill T. Arnold, "Soul-Searching Questions About 1 Samuel 28: Samuel's Appearance at Endor and Christian Anthropology," in *What About The Soul? Neuroscience and Christian Anthropology*, ed. Joel B. Green (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 75-83.

<sup>5</sup>Athalya Brenner, *I Am . . . : Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 202.

Mount of Transfiguration.<sup>6</sup> Many commentators today see the apparition as Samuel, present at the medium's séance but actually sent by God.

A second group of interpreters saw the figure as a demonic impersonator giving a false prophecy calculated to deceive and destroy Saul. For example, Tertullian thought the apparition was a demon, applying the apostolic warning about Satan masquerading as an angel of light and his servants as servants of righteousness (2 Cor 11:14-15). Many commentators in this group argued that it was "impossible for a holy prophet to be disturbed and raised from the dead by necromantic rituals. Saints may be able to exorcize evil spirits, but the reverse is not true—demons are not able to call up dead saints."<sup>7</sup> Smelik finds that historically this group "seems to have been the most authoritative."<sup>8</sup>

This paper will argue that the exegetical evidence favours the second view.

### 1. *The context involves Canaanite ritual*

En-Dor probably still had a Canaanite population in Saul's time. Manasseh took En-Dor during the occupation, but failed to drive out the inhabitants of the land (Josh 17:11-12), and Hutter<sup>9</sup> argues that the place name En-Dor came from *enna durenna*, the Hittite term for the gods. Collins notes, "The Hittites maintained an active line of communication with the deities who lived beneath the earth in order to retain their goodwill." She compares the En-Dor story to a Hittite ritual where the "ritual specialist" makes figurines of the underworld gods, opens a pit in the ground into which honey, wine and other libations are poured and money is thrown, and conjures the spirit. "Such rituals typically included sacrificing an animal over the pit as well."<sup>10</sup>

Recent discoveries from Ugarit offer important background to this passage, and suggest that the medium works to summon deceased and divinized ancestors from the underworld in a Canaanite style. Arnold summarises the situation:

Whereas previous scholarship tended to deny the presence of ancestral worship in ancient Israel, it is now generally agreed that normative Yahwism battled against the practice of necromancy and other death rituals, such as self-laceration and offerings to deceased ancestors. As with such practices in comparable cultures, it is assumed that Israelite cults of the dead sought to appease the dead or to secure favours from them.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Arnold, "Soul-Searching Questions," 77, 199 n.8, citing Augustine, *De octo dulcetii quaestionibus*, 6.1-4.

<sup>7</sup>Arnold, "Soul-Searching Questions," 77.

<sup>8</sup>Smelik, "Witch," 165.

<sup>9</sup>Manfred Hutter, "Religionsgeschichtliche Erwagungen zu *elohim* in 1Sam 28,13," *Biblische Notizen* (1983) 32-36.

<sup>10</sup>Billie Jean Collins, *The Hittites and Their World* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 169-170.

<sup>11</sup>Bill T. Arnold, "Religion in Ancient Israel," in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (ed. David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold; Grand

Egyptian and Mesopotamian ancestor worship is well attested, but Ugarit provides the closest parallel material to the En-Dor narrative. One tablet from Ras Shamra (KTU 1.161) describes the liturgy for a mortuary ritual which invokes departed royal ancestors to bless the current king and the immediately deceased king. It invites the *rp'm* (similar to the Hebrew *rephaim*), who are long-deceased ancestors, and the *mlkm*, the recently-deceased rulers, to help and bless. This text and others reveal “a vibrant cult of ancestor worship at Ugarit” and explain “an ongoing battle throughout Israel’s history between normative Yahwism and practitioners of death rituals in the popular religion.”<sup>12</sup>

Del Olmo Lete notes that the Ugaritic ritual text KTU 1.124

suggests an illuminating comparison with 1 Samuel 28, the episode of the “witch of Endor.” The recently established “king” of Israel forbids necromancy in his kingdom as well as every other funerary divination connected with the typically Canaanite cult of the dead. However, he uses these practices when the “Yahwistic” systems of cultic response (dreams, lots, and oracles) fail him. It is clear that the ban is determined by the demands of his faith, but it must be asked whether it is not due to defending a royal monopoly, inherited from the Canaanite model of royalty through which the sovereign addresses the “founder of the dynasty,” in this case Samuel, to question him about matters concerning his kingdom. . . . Yet the persistence of Canaanite usage and beliefs is more obvious in the phrases used by the necromancer to express her experience: “I see a god (*’elohim*) who is coming up from the earth/underworld” (1 Sam 28:1). This is exactly one of the epithets (*ilb/ilbm*) given to the dead and deified kings of Ugarit (KTU 1.39:5). Saul and his sons would also belong to this royal aristocracy when they died the following day (v.19).<sup>13</sup>

(Within this paradigm, one can imagine that the prediction that Saul and sons would be “with me” [1 Sam 28:19] would have suggested the flattering promise of being included among the great in the next world.) In a section on royal necromancy, Del Olmo Lete describes a Canaanite ritual of “summoning” which is similar to what we see at En-Dor, and several other texts depicting a model of cultic consultation and reply, seeking “divine people” (especially

---

Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 414. See also T. J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit*, HSM 39 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989). B. B. Schmidt, *Israel’s Beneficent Dead: Ancestor Cult and Necromancy in Ancient Israelite Religion and Tradition*, FAT 111 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1994; reprinted Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996). Klaus Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, AOAT 219 (Kevelaer: Butzon and Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn; Neukirchener Verlag, 1986). N. J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament*, BibOr 21 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969).

<sup>12</sup>Arnold, “Religion,” 415. See also Pierre Bordeuil, “Ugarit and the Bible: New Data from the House of Urtenu,” in *Ugarit at Seventy-Five* (ed. K. Lawson Younger, Jr.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 89-100:93.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 315.

dead kings) and “netherworld gods” (*ilm*, cf. Hebrew *’elohim*).<sup>14</sup> So the woman is likely a “Canaanite priestess.”<sup>15</sup>

Saul asks her to divine for him using a *’ob* (28:8; KJV “familiar spirit”; cf. 28:3, 8, 9). Hutter<sup>16</sup> sees this word as related to the Hittite expression *api*, which means “both the one buried and enclosed in earth” and also a “sacrificial grave/ burial site.” He cites a ritual text from Hattusa which refers to a sacred burial spot, and which seeks guidance from ancient gods and from Aduntarri who was a prophet—as was Samuel. Strauss<sup>17</sup> sees an *’ob* as a “conjuring pit” where the dead (who are thought of as *’elohim*, diving beings, cf. Babylonian *etemmu*, divine ancestors in the underworld) are supposed to come up from the underworld. He cites Isaiah 29:4 as an instance of this. Podella<sup>18</sup> argues that an *’ob* is related to *’ab* = father or ancestor, and means “deceased ancestor,” by analogy with the Ugaritic *ilib* which is made up of *il* = god and *ib* = father, hence “divine ancestor.” He identifies Mesopotamian necromancers named *muselo sa etemmi* “the one who brings a spirit of the dead,” which he compares to וְשֹׁאֵל אֲבוֹת וְיִדְעֵנִי “the one who asks ancestors and knower of the future” and וְרָשָׁה אֱלֹהֵי-הַמָּתִים “the one who questions the dead” (Deut 18:11). It would seem that the meaning of the term *’ob* included both the spirit, believed to be that of the deceased ancestor, and the conjuring site through which it spoke.

Tsumura offers the fascinating proposal that the medium tries to conjure the Solar goddess, who was believed to travel through the underworld from west to east each night and act as the “*psychopompe*, that is, the one who brings the spirit of the dead up or down.” He also cites text 1.161 from Ugarit as describing her escorting the newly deceased king Niqmiddu down to the underworld. Thus the phrase אִשָּׁת בַּעַל-הָאֲבוֹת could mean a servant of the solar goddess, or “woman who serves the Lady of dead spirits.”<sup>19</sup>

This Canaanite background should be influential in interpreting 1 Samuel 28. Hutter’s conclusion is that the witch “speaks of an old local custom of conjuration of underworld deities” rather than of a supernatural Samuel. He supports this by arguing that “conjuring the dead originally meant nothing other than a cult of foreign gods” which explains the radical prohibitions of it (Deut 18:10; Lev 20:6). He argues that if the narrator of 1 Samuel meant

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 346.

<sup>15</sup>Serge Frolov and Vladimir Orel “Notes on 1 Samuel,” *Biblische Notizen* 74 (1994), 15-23.

<sup>16</sup>Hutter, “1Sam 28,13,” 32-36. See also J. Ebach and U. Rutersworden, “Unterweltbeschwörung im Alten Testament” *UF* 9 (1997): 57-70; *UF* 12 (1980): 205-220.

<sup>17</sup>Hans Strauss, “Über die Grenzen? Exegetische Betrachtungen zu 1 Sam 28, 3-25 auf dem Hintergrund bestimmter Strömungen im Rahmen des sogenannten ‘New Age,’” *Biblische Notizen* 50 (1989): 17-25.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas Podella, “Nekromantie,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 177 (1997): 121-133.

<sup>19</sup>David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 630-631.

to describe the real “spirit of the deceased Samuel” other words would have been used, such as אֲשֵׁרִים (Isa 19:3) or רְפָאִים (Prov 21:16).<sup>20</sup>

This scene depicts a clash of worldviews—that of orthodox Yahwism and of the Canaanite paradigm of life after death. The woman should be not be expected to express an “Old Testament” or “biblical” worldview, or to speak for the writer of Samuel.

## 2. *The medium speaks as a polytheist*

The medium tells Saul, “I see *’elohim* (‘gods’, KJV) coming up from the earth” (28:13). The term *’elohim* can be translated as a singular (God or god) or plural (gods), usually depending on context,<sup>21</sup> but here the medium uses it with a plural verb: “they are coming up.” This is consistent with polytheism: the Philistines use *’elohim* with plural grammar (4:8), and it is used in describing the worship of gods other than Yahweh (8:8; 26:19).<sup>22</sup> Saul’s reply ignores her plural, and uses the singular: “What does he look like?” (28:14). Saul is a monotheist. The medium then perhaps changes her story to suit her audience, or perhaps focuses on just one of the apparitions she sees arising,<sup>23</sup> and says, “An old man is coming up” (28:14). Many commentators do not mention the change from plural to singular, while some see it merely as an anomalous grammatical change without rhetorical effect, but it reveals that two different religious paradigms are in conflict in this conversation.

This misunderstanding produces irony when Saul complains to an apparition who has just been called *’elohim* (plural) that *’elohim* (singular, and parallel to the term “Yahweh”) is no longer answering him and so he has

<sup>20</sup>Hutter, “1 Sam 28,13,” 35.

<sup>21</sup>J.C.L. Gibson, *Davidson’s Introductory Hebrew Grammar—Syntax* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 23, s26, says “When אֱלֹהִים means *gods* it takes a plur., and in a few cases even when it is *God*, Gen. 20.13 (or in an address to foreigners is *the gods* meant?); 35.7, Ex. 22.8 (in both of which a polytheistic background may be detected or be being exploited, cf. Gen. 28.12).”

<sup>22</sup>For a helpful analysis of more examples of the use of *’elohim* with plural predication, see Michael S. Heiser, “Should אֱלֹהִים *’Elohim* With Plural Predication Be Translated *Gods*?” *BT* Vol. 61, No. 3: 123-136. Heiser sees rare cases of “anomalous grammatical agreement,” e.g. when a “normally singular verb form will be plural in agreement with the so-called plural of majesty.” He cites Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (trans. and rev. Takamitsu Muraoka; 2 vols.; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2003; 2005), 2:553. Heiser’s treatment of 1 Sam 28:13 is brief and does not come to a conclusion about whether it should be read as God or gods, perhaps because his analysis is based on the assumption that this text and the others he considers “bear no hint that the biblical writer wants the reader to assume that a foreigner or apostate is anywhere in view” (125). I would submit that the En-Dor narrative has both a foreigner (as argued in point 1 above) and an apostate (see point 4 below).

<sup>23</sup>The Talmud suggests that Samuel came up, bringing Moses with him. See Shaul Bar, “Saul and the ‘Witch of En-Dor,’” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39:2 (2011): 99-107.

“called on you” (28:15). He has just exchanged the *’elohim* of Yahwism for the *’elohim* of Canaanite religion as a source of guidance.

### 3. *The meal is part of the ritual*

Meals have received more attention in biblical studies in recent years,<sup>24</sup> and this one is fully described in an otherwise economical narrative,<sup>25</sup> which suggests something more than mere nutrition is going on. When the medium kills the calf (the violence creating chilling atmospherics), the verb is not *שָׁחַט* (= slaughter, butcher, slay . . . animals for food, BDB370) but *זָבַח* (= slaughter for sacrifice, BDB256). Of the word’s 129 uses, 127 clearly refer to ‘cultic ritual slaughter’.<sup>26</sup> Sacrifice (mainly described using this word but also by synonyms) is an important motif in the book of Samuel, beginning with the faithful sacrifice of Elkanah (1:3, 4, 21); then the abuse of sacrifice by Eli’s sons (chap. 2), a sin whose guilt cannot be removed by sacrifice (3:14). Saul is called to kingship at a sacrificial meal (chap. 9) and enthroned after sacrifice (chap. 10-11). His first disobedience is sacrificing for himself (13:8-14) and his second involves the excuse of using the animals for sacrifice (15:15, 21) though Samuel fires back that obedience is better than sacrifice (15:22). Saul’s kingship, begun at a sacrificial meal, now ends at one (chap. 28).<sup>27</sup>

The meal may also form part of a covenant ritual. Reis<sup>28</sup> argues this was a ritual meal, citing Leviticus 19:26, “Do not eat any meat with the blood still in it. Do not practise divination or sorcery.” The parallelism suggests eating

<sup>24</sup>Gerald Klingbeil, “‘Momentsaufnahmen’ of Israelite Religion: The Importance of the Communal Meal in Narrative Texts in I/II Regum and Their Ritual Dimension,” *ZAW* 118 (2006): 22-45; 31-32, notes that meals had a meaning beyond the pragmatic, creating “community,” “political dimensions related to contracts,” and “covenants in the religious sphere” (Exod 24:11), and “were part and parcel of standard cultic procedure in the context of religious feasts.” Further see Nathan MacDonald, *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat? Diet in Biblical Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), and *Not Bread Alone: The Uses of Food in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>25</sup>Frolov and Orel, “Notes,” 19, count six verses, starting from v. 19 where food is first mentioned.

<sup>26</sup>J. Milgrom, “Profane Slaughter and a Formulaic Key to the Composition of Deuteronomy,” *HUCA* 47 [1976], 1-2. The two exceptions are Deut 12:15, 21 which, in a chapter commanding sacrifice only in Yahweh’s ordained place, also permit ‘secular’ butchery and eating of clean animals at home, as long as the blood is not consumed. In Samuel, all occurrences of *זָבַח* describe Yahwistic sacrifice, although Judges 16:23 depicts Philistine sacrifice to Dagon.

<sup>27</sup>For a fuller treatment of parallels between these two scenes, see Grenville J. R. Kent, *Say It Again, Sam: a literary and filmic study of narrative repetition in 1 Samuel 28*. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 148-152.

<sup>28</sup>Pamela Tamarkin Reis, “Eating the Blood: Saul and the Witch of Endor,” *JSOT* 73 (1997): 3-23.

the blood is related to sorcery. Maimonides saw eating this bloody meal as a ritual of witchcraft:

They thought it was the food of the spirits [the dead]; by eating it, man has something in common with the spirits, which join him and tell him future events. . . . They imagined that . . . love, brotherhood and friendship with the spirits were established, because they dined with the latter . . . ; that the spirits would appear to them in dreams, inform them of coming events, and be favourable to them. . . . The Law . . . forbade the eating of blood, and emphasized the prohibition in exactly the same terms as it emphasizes idolatry.<sup>29</sup>

Grintz<sup>30</sup> distinguishes between two offences: that of eating blood (Gen 9:4; Lev 3:17; 7:26-27; 17:10,13,14; Deut 12:16,23; 15:23), which is based on the idea of the life being in the blood, and the offences of eating “on” or “upon” (על or אל) the blood (Lev 19:26; 1 Sam 14:32, 33, 34 [אל] and Ezek 33:25 [על]), which he claims is based on the identification with witchcraft due to the parallelism between the first and second clauses of Lev 19:26.<sup>31</sup>

The En-Dor narrative spends three verbs on the preparation of *matzah* bread (28:24), a constituent of a sacrificial offering (e.g. Lev 2:4, 11).

In considering eating in the cultic context of worshipping foreign deities, one recalls Israel’s earlier encounter with Moabite worship. In Num 25:1-3, Israel “ate and bowed down before these gods” (*’elohim*), with tragic results. The psalmist describes the Moabite incident in these terms: “They joined themselves to Baal-Peor and ate the sacrifices of the dead” (106:28). This matches recent findings that the Moabites regarded their dead as divinized, and that their worship involved sharing food generated by sacrifice, presumably in an attempt to secure blessing and guidance. Yet the psalmist goes further, describing a time when Israel left orthodox Yahwism and “sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto devils” (NIV “demons”), and then parallels this in the next verse with sacrificing them “to the idols of Canaan” (Ps 106:37-38). This parallelism equates the idols of Canaan with devils (c.f. also Deut 12:31). Deut 32:16-18 also speaks of sacrificing to strange gods who are devils,<sup>32</sup> not Israel’s known *’elohim* (Yahweh) but foreign *’elohim* (gods).

Frolov and Orel seem correct in observing that the meal “is a symbolic act confirming [Saul’s] covenant with the medium of En-Dor and the host of

<sup>29</sup>Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlander (repr.; New York: Dover, 1956), 362.

<sup>30</sup>Jehoshua M. Grintz, “Do Not Eat on the Blood”: Reconsiderations in Setting and Dating of the Priestly Code,” in *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute*, vol 8, ed. Hans Kosmala (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), 78-105.

<sup>31</sup>Grintz, “Do Not Eat on the Blood,” 80, notes that “modern Jewish Biblical research has continued to understand the verse [1 Sam 14:33] in the same way: viz. that the act of ‘eating on the blood’ was for purposes of divination.”

<sup>32</sup>As does a later commentator in 1 Cor 10:20.



evil spirits in a futile attempt to change his fate.”<sup>33</sup> For them, this shows “Saul left the God of Israel and fell into paganism.”

So the meal is a necromantic sacrifice to the dead, including eating of blood as explicitly forbidden by the Torah, and is an “unholy but legally effective covenant between God’s anointed and an idolatrous shaman.” Reis puts it neatly: “The witch does not set before the king so dainty a dish as has been hitherto supposed.”<sup>34</sup>

#### 4. *Saul has shown vulnerability to fortune-telling and the demonic*

Samuel’s second rebuke of Saul back in 1 Samuel 15 hangs over the entire story of Saul in a telling way. Samuel said obedience is better than sacrifice, and added:

“Because rebelliousness is like the sin of divination/witchcraft (*chattatb-  
gesem*) And to be stubborn is like the evil of idolatry (*teraphim*)” (1 Samuel 15:23).

At the time, this remark felt harsh and perhaps even undeserved. Would Saul, who has had his heart changed by Yahweh and has been among the prophets, really be in danger of *gesem*, the pagan divination practiced by the Philistines (1 Sam 6:2) and forbidden as the practice that saw other nations driven out of the land (Deut 18:10-14), and the sorcery that Balaam attempted to use against Israel (Num 22:7; 23:23; Josh 13:22)? Would Saul really be tempted by *teraphim*, the household idols which were used by Laban (Gen 31:19, 30–35,<sup>35</sup> where they are also called *’elohim*), who practiced divination (30:27), and which were part of the disastrous apostasy of Micah (Jdg 17:5-18:20)? Podella describes *teraphim* as statuettes, household images of deceased ancestors similar to the “household gods” of Nuzi and Meskene (Emar) in Syria which are at times associated with the *metu* = dead and the *etemmu* = spirit of the dead.<sup>36</sup> Later, *teraphim* would be among the foreign worship practices abolished by the reforming King Josiah, associated with *הַאֲבוֹת* and *הַיִּדְעָנִים* and *הַגִּלְלִים* (= idols, 2 Kgs 23:24). The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar would use *teraphim* in divining which path to take with his armies (Ezek 21:16). Zechariah also describes *teraphim* as communicating trouble or wickedness, and parallels them with *הַקִּזְקִיִּים* who have seen a lie and told false dreams (Zech 10:2). Would Saul really fall for such obvious idolatry? Are Samuel’s words going to fall to the ground?

We are kept in suspense for four chapters until, in a tense scene, Saul’s daughter Michal puts a *teraphim* in David’s bed to cover his escape (1 Sam 19:13, 16). Saul in his throne room sees the *teraphim* (the term appears twice, the second with a *hinneh* emphasising Saul’s point of view), but Saul offers

<sup>33</sup>Frolov and Orel, “Notes,” 20.

<sup>34</sup>Reis, “Witch,” 4.

<sup>35</sup>In contrast with Joseph, whose claim to be able to divine (*nachash*, Gen 44:12) may have been part of his act of deception against his brothers, making him look more Egyptian.

<sup>36</sup>Thomas Podella, “Nekromantie,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 177 (1997): 121-133.

no shocked or negative comments about idolatry, and so we can assume he knows about it and tolerates it. Samuel’s prophetic word has been shown to be reliable.

And then, thirteen chapters later, we are told that Saul had previously gotten rid of occult practitioners. This seems to contradict Samuel’s prediction about witchcraft, and creates some suspense, but it proves to be a narrative feint: just four verses later Saul consults a witch and begins with the exact word Samuel used: *qasami-na ba’ob*. So while the *teraphim* appeared subtly in the background of an scene, the *qasami* is blatantly spoken by Saul himself, even after hearing Samuel grammatically connect the term to sin (*chattath–gesem*, 15:23). This then is deliberate rebellion. While Saul’s defection to the witch is shocking and tragic, it merely reveals in crisis those trends which were hidden but present in his normal life, and which Samuel had prophetically seen. One tradition of scholarship<sup>37</sup> sees Saul as harshly treated due to Yahweh’s favouritism for David, but Saul’s deliberate and ongoing defiance seems to provide solid reasons for Yahweh to remove him as king.

Related to this, Saul had a history of what could be called demonic oppression. Immediately after David is anointed, the Spirit of Yahweh came upon David, but almost immediately afterwards we are told that the Spirit of Yahweh had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from Yahweh tormented him (1 Sam 16:13-14).<sup>38</sup> This seems to be a regular problem which is openly acknowledged at his court (16:14-15, 23; 18:10; 19:9). Some contemporary exegetes take this as a primitive, pre-scientific description of mental illness<sup>39</sup> rather than a serious pneumatological and parapsychological statement, but Hebrew had clear terms to describe madness (e.g. 1 Sam 21:15-16). While the word רָחַם can be used of human emotions such as קָשַׁת־רָחַם (1:15), the usage in 16:14 has the name of God attached, suggesting more than merely a human spirit. Saul had previously been influenced by the divine Spirit: after his anointing (predicted in 10:6, “Spirit of Yahweh,” fulfilled in 10:10, “Spirit of God”) and before his successful defence of Jabesh-Gilead (11:6).

So by the time Saul visits En-Dor, he seems vulnerable to demonic deceptions.

##### 5. *The rebuke by the apparent Samuel dramatically escalates the punishment*

In the stinging speech of rebuke delivered by the apparent Samuel at En-Dor, many commentators hear no significant difference from the previous

<sup>37</sup>Reflected in John Goldingay, *Men Behaving Badly*, (Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 2000), 584-85, who puts the view that Saul was punished too harshly for a “marginal sin committed under increasing pressure.”

<sup>38</sup>David later prays the Spirit of God will not leave him. Ps 51:11.

<sup>39</sup>Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, and epilepsy are considered in a contemporary therapeutic perspective presented by G. P. Williams and M. Le Rou., 2012, ‘King Saul’s mysterious malady’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68, no. 1 (2012): 6 pages. Accessed September 9, 2014. doi: 10.4102/hts.v68i1.906.

rebukes by the living Samuel<sup>40</sup> except that a timeframe is now given. Many conclude it is therefore a genuine prophetic message. However, while it is clear that this last rebuke does repeat a lot of Samuel's previous comments, a careful comparison of the three rebukes<sup>41</sup> shows that the last one increases his punishment quite dramatically.

The first rebuke (1 Sam 13:10-14) blames Saul for sacrificing unlawfully and against a clear instruction. After a confronting but fair-minded opening question that elicits Saul's excuse, Samuel delivers the consequence: Saul's kingship will not endure. Yahweh has sought "a man after his own heart" as leader "because you have not kept Yahweh's command." There is no thought of death for Saul or his family when the kingship ends.

The second rebuke (1 Sam 15:13-35) is for failing to execute *cherem* on the Amalekites. It too begins with a question. It faults Saul for an attitude of rebelliousness and stubbornness comparable to witchcraft and idolatry, and then states the punishment: "Because you have rejected the word of Yahweh, he has rejected you as king." But even after this mention of occult activity, death is not mentioned for Saul or anyone else.

The last rebuke, given by the apparent Samuel in En-Dor, has some similar features. It begins with a question. There is one new element: the "neighbour" is named for the first time as David, but that was already obvious from the plot and Saul's own words (1 Sam 24:20). Otherwise, verses 17-18 merely repeat the living Samuel's previous rebukes and the existing punishment of losing the kingdom because Saul did not obey Yahweh. These similarities could suggest either the same speaker or alternatively a clever impersonator. Yet verse 19 is new material. "Yahweh will hand over both Israel and you to the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me." These elements—military defeat for Israel, death for Saul, death for his sons—are totally new, and massively extend the punishment *for the same offences*. Yet these outcomes were by no means inevitable: as Goldingay has observed, "Defeat did not have to mean death. It had not done so in previous engagements between Israel and Philistia, whichever side won. Even if it did, his death did not have to mean his sons' deaths."<sup>42</sup> This third rebuke did not mention any new sins (though see point 7 below), so one could ask why a just God would add to the punishment? Could this suggest that the speaker is not Samuel?

After this rebuke, Saul is devastated. He goes out into the night, both literally and figuratively, only to lose the next day's battle and to commit suicide. One would expect the real Samuel to make some attempt to reconcile Saul to God before his death, to offer him grace despite his sins and suggest he should repent, to remind him of Israel's gospel of sacrifice for sin and

<sup>40</sup>J. P. Fokkeman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: a full interpretation based on stylistic and structural analyses, Vol II, The Crossing Fates (I Sam. 13-31 & II Sam. 1)* (Assen/Maastricht/ Dover, NH: Van Gorcum, 1986), 618; Goldingay, *Behaving Badly*, 584.

<sup>41</sup>For more detailed analysis see Kent, *Say it again, Sam*, 186-194.

<sup>42</sup>Goldingay, *Behaving Badly*, 178.

guilt, but the message has none of these elements and in fact drives Saul to despair and self-destruction. Is this message consistent with the justice and grace of Yahweh? If not, is it likely that the one who delivered it was Yahweh's prophet Samuel?

6. *The rebuke by the apparent Samuel  
complains about “bringing me up”*

One smaller detail also questions the identity of the apparent Samuel. The opening line of his rebuke is “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?” Considering the scale of the issues at stake for Israel and its king, this would be a rather petty and self-focussed comment for the real Samuel.<sup>43</sup> And it would be strange indeed if it came from a prophet who was very willing to be awakened, and to disturb Eli repeatedly, in order to hear a word from Yahweh (1 Sam 3). If, as a number of commentators argue,<sup>44</sup> God seized the initiative to turn an occultic consultation into an opportunity for true prophecy, why would Samuel begin by complaining about being there at all? Would he not willingly go on a mission for God?

Further, why would the real Samuel credit the woman or Saul with bringing him up? The phrase “come/bring up” is noticeably repeated in the conjuration scene. Saul has asked the woman to bring someone up (28:8, Hiphil of עלה), and she has asked him whom to bring up (28:11, Hiphil of עלה) and been told to bring up Samuel (28:11, Hiphil of עלה), then described the divinized dead and then an old man coming up (28:13, 14, Qal of עלה) and after all that repetition of the phrase, the apparent Samuel then complains about being brought up. As Pigott points out, “according to Samuel's words in v.15, he was disturbed from his sleep by the conjuring.”<sup>45</sup> If this was the real Samuel sent by God, why would he suggest the medium had brought him up? This would attribute to her the ability to decide what happens to Yahweh's faithful prophet, who is under divine control. According to Hannah's speech, which functions as a predictive overture introducing key themes of the book, it is Yahweh who brings down to Sheol, and who brings up (1 Sam 2:6, Hiphil of עלה).<sup>46</sup>

Further, these repeated mentions of coming up raise the question: From where? In the traditional Christian paradigm, would God's prophet and a lost

<sup>43</sup>Bar, “Witch,” 104, considers Phoenician royal tomb inscriptions warning against grave-robbing, and claims Samuel complains Saul is “desecrating his grave and disturbing his rest,” but the text makes clear that Saul is in En-Dor while Samuel's grave is in Ramah.

<sup>44</sup>E.g. W.A.M. Beuken, “1 Samuel 28: The Prophet as ‘Hammer of Witches.’” *JSOT* 6 (1978): 3–17 and Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 271.

<sup>45</sup>Susan M. Pigott, “1 Samuel 28—Saul and the Not So Wicked Witch of Endor,” *Review & Expositor* 95 (Summer 1998): 435–44: 442, n.12.

<sup>46</sup>The parallelism here with “kills and makes alive” suggests that this may well be one of the rare OT mentions of the possibility of resurrection. The wicked, by contrast, are “made silent in darkness” (2:9).

king really end up in the same place after their deaths? This does not seem to fit with traditional notions of eternal life in heaven or hell. It could fit with some constructs of Sheol, yet these have problems of their own and are not held by all scholars, though full discussion is outside the scope of this paper.

If the real Samuel would have been unlikely to complain, or to attribute to the medium the power to bring him up, then is it likely this figure is him?

#### 7. *The rebuke ignores the most obvious issue*

The rebuke by the apparent Samuel does not blame Saul for his most obvious sin of all—the divination itself. One grumpy, self-centred complaint about having his own sleep disturbed is hardly equivalent to a rebuke for the damning sin of divination. Miscall observes: “Samuel says nothing of Saul’s sin of divination and consulting a medium.”<sup>47</sup> Pigott also comments: “In every passage where necromancy is mentioned, the Hebrew Bible clearly decries the practice and/or condemns the practitioner—every passage, that is, except one. . . . [O]ne of the most striking aspects of the account is the complete absence of the expected negative word about the witch.”<sup>48</sup>

By contrast, Chronicles reveals that the divination was a key reason for Saul’s death: “Saul died for his transgression which he committed against the Lord, *even* against the word of the Lord, which he kept not, and also for asking *counsel* of *one that had* a familiar spirit [an *’ob*], to inquire *of it*; and inquired not of the Lord: therefore He slew him.” (1 Chron 10:13, 14, KJV, italics reflecting words supplied by the translators). Some<sup>49</sup> have seen here a contradiction with 1 Samuel, which says Saul did enquire of God (28:6). This can be harmonised in various ways<sup>50</sup> but the Chronicles passage may be understood as revealing from whom Saul really enquired at En-Dor—from an *’ob* spirit but not from God. The Chronicler gives a summary of Saul’s disobedience (c.f. the incidents in 1 Sam 13 and 15), and of the key sins is the divination which remains secret through Saul’s story except for Samuel’s exposure of it. Chronicles reveals that the divination finally results in Saul’s death, perhaps not least because of a discouraging and self-fulfilling prophecy

<sup>47</sup>Peter D. Miscall, *1 Samuel: A Literary Reading*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 169–70. Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 375 likewise notes that there is no rebuke for “the sin of necromancy and the presence of the medium.”

<sup>48</sup>Pigott, “Not So Wicked Witch,” 435, uses this as evidence for a positive view of the witch.

<sup>49</sup>E.g. Jacob M. Myers, *The Anchor Bible: 1 Chronicles* (New York: Doubleday & Co, 1965), 82.

<sup>50</sup>For one thing, the two passages use different Hebrew verbs. The question is beyond the scope of this paper, but for one example of harmonisation, see J. A. Thompson, *NAC 1, 2 Chronicles* (Broadman & Holman, 1994), 266, who cites other Chronicles references where enquiring of God or seeking God is a broad attitude which involves devotion and obedience in all of life.

that results in his battlefield suicide. This is actually quite consistent with the narrative of Samuel.

It is striking indeed that the apparent Samuel does not mention this sin in a rebuke which is otherwise comprehensive, when the real Samuel had previously raised divination as a major issue (1 Sam 15:22-23).

8. *The apparent Samuel's predictions are questionable*

Many commentators accept that the predictions of the apparent Samuel come true, but careful examination reveals nagging questions about the accuracy of some details. Of course the prediction generally comes true: Israel suffers military defeat. Yet this was not difficult to predict, and Saul already feared it (1 Sam 28:5). However some details do not fit. The prediction is, “Yahweh will hand over both Israel and you to the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me.” Yet Saul is not handed to the Philistines—he kills himself before they can get him. The Philistines do take his body, but this does not happen “tomorrow” as they do not come to strip the bodies until the day after (31:8), and the men of Jabesh Gilead soon recover his body immediately and put it permanently beyond Philistine reach (1 Sam 31:12-13; cf 2 Sam 21:12-14). And perhaps most obvious, Saul’s sons do not all die on the same day. It appears that they have, as three sons die in battle (1 Sam 31:2) and the narrator has so far listed only three sons for Saul (Jonathan, Ishvi, Malki-Shua, 1 Sam 14:49) compared with four listed by the Chronicler (Jehonathan, Malki-Shua, Abinadab and Esh-Baal, 1 Chron 8:33).<sup>51</sup> Yet a few chapters after the apparent Samuel’s prediction, “Ish-Bosheth son of Saul” appears, with the title “son of Saul” repeatedly linked to his name even when it is not necessary as he has already been introduced (2 Sam 2:8-10, 12, 15; 4:8).

Why might these inconsistencies become apparent? Perhaps the narrator was initially withholding information to create mystery, planning to reveal the whole story later so that readers would go back and question the identity of the apparent Samuel. These nagging discrepancies raise doubts that the speaker at En-Dor could be the prophet Samuel, who always spoke Yahweh’s word accurately, with no words falling to the ground (1 Sam 3:19-21). Evans says of the apparent Samuel, “if this really was Samuel, his information was somewhat limited.”<sup>52</sup> As the attentive reader notes these mistakes, curiosity may cause a re-examination of what was actually said, revealing that it was the apparent Samuel who sent us down the wrong path. This leaves the unsettling feeling of having been tricked by an occult practitioner, and the reader’s emotional involvement makes the story hard to forget. Of course

<sup>51</sup>This can be harmonised seeing Ishvi and Abinadab as alternate names for the same man, seeing Ish-Baal/Ish-Bosheth as a younger son not mentioned by the Samuel narrator for some reason, and recognizing that slightly different spellings are not uncommon.

<sup>52</sup>Mary J. Evans, *The Message of Samuel* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 154-155.

the narrator has allowed this temporary confusion by withholding key information, yet this is not unreliable narration;<sup>53</sup> it is mystery writing that results in a bewitching story with a memorable theme.

#### 9. *Torah allusions offer clear guidance*

While engaging in mystery writing, the narrator also guides the alert reader with clear allusions to the Torah's strong prohibitions of necromancy, and these ring alarm bells about what is really going on. The medium asks Saul why he tries to lay a snare (מִתְּנֵקֶשׁ) for her life, and she uses a word which has been used only once previously in Scripture as part of a passage warning against being ensnared by the religious practices of the Canaanites (Deut 12:29-13:5). This Torah warns against being ensnared (פְּרִי־תִנְקֶשׁ, v.30), and also warns against enquiring (דָּרַשׁ cf. Saul in 28:7) after "their gods" or "other gods," אֱלֹהִים cf. 1 Sam 28:13), and goes on to mention the role of a prophet (נָבִיא Deut 13:1; cf. 1 Sam 28:6, 15) and to command that, even if their predictions are fulfilled, Israel should not heed/obey (שָׁמַע Deut 13:3; cf. 1 Sam 28:21, 22, 23) that prophet but should heed/obey Yahweh's voice (הַשְׁמָר וְקִלְיָ Deut 13:4; cf. 1 Sam 28:18) because that prophet or dreamer is trying to drive them from Yahweh's chosen path הַדֶּרֶךְ (Deut 13:6; cf. 1 Sam 28:22). So much shared vocabulary strongly suggests a deliberate inter-textual allusion to Deuteronomy, which should put the reader on guard. The woman accuses Saul of laying a snare for her, but the twist is that it is Saul who, in Deuteronomic terms, is really ensnared.

The question of heeding/obeying also features in the En-Dor scene. Saul has been rebuked for heeding the voice of the people (1 Sam 15:18–21) and not heeding Yahweh's voice (1 Sam 28:18), and now the woman claims that she has heeded Saul's voice and his words (28:21, x2) and so he should heed her voice: Reinhartz notes the striking contrast between her "ostensibly self-deprecating language and the bold tone, and presumption of mutuality"<sup>54</sup> in 28:21. The woman says Saul should eat so that he can go on his way (28:22). Eventually Saul heeds (28:23). This is a not-so-subtle power play

<sup>53</sup>Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 51 insists the "narrator is absolutely straightforward and reliable." Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1981), 117, mentions the "reliable" narrator. This reliability is questioned by David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 53-56, who suggest narrators can employ irony against readers. Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narratives Ethically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 10-11, sees the narrator as "omniscient" but allows "there are arguably a few places where the statements of the narrator conflict with other data in the text, which could suggest the author does not endorse every word of the narrator." Wenham cites Joshua, though no specific reference.

<sup>54</sup>Adele Reinhartz, "Anonymity and Character in the Books of Samuel." *Semeia* 63 (1993): 117-141.

on the woman's part, which effectively replaces Yahweh's voice with hers as Saul's source of guidance. The “issue of who is listening (that is obeying)” is vital to the story.<sup>55</sup> Early in the scene, Saul is giving orders (28:8, 11, 13) and overcoming her reluctance, but late in the scene she is giving orders and overcoming Saul's reluctance (28:21–25). She has taken the upper hand. She has survived. Saul will not.

The En-Dor scene is also written with conscious allusions to a passage in Deuteronomy 18 containing very similar concepts. The warning against Canaanite religious practices contains the term קָסָם קְסָמִים (Deut 18:10) used in Saul's request in 1 Sam 28:8, and וְיִדְעֵנִי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי-חַמְצִיחִים (Deut 18:11), which matches the terms used about the occultists Saul banned (28:3, 9) and also Saul's seeking (cf. 1 Sam 28:7) of Samuel when Samuel is dead (1 Sam 28:3, repeated after 25:1). These practices are said to be the reason the Canaanites were expelled (which links this passage to Deut 12:29–30 above) and then genuine prophecy is introduced as the true Yahwistic alternative (Deut 18:12–22; cf. 1 Sam 28:6, 15).

In a mysterious plot, these references to the Torah<sup>56</sup> show the alert reader how to understand what is really happening.

#### 10. *The woman is a mixed character*

The medium has often been described as entirely evil or entirely saintly. Art by Salvator Rosa portrays “a withered hag, with blood-shot eyeballs staring from their sockets, harpy talons, pendent dugs, and snaky tresses; amid a court of attendant imps, grotesque and hideous as herself.”<sup>57</sup> Yet many contemporary commentators<sup>58</sup> paint her as totally nice, like Samantha in *Bewitched*. She offers food and insights to Saul, an enemy who had previously banished her craft<sup>59</sup> and whose nation was committed to wiping out hers. Robinson even finds her kindness a “‘Christian’ act.”<sup>60</sup>

Yet the narrator is too deft a dramatist and too realistic a theologian to write a one-dimensional characterization. Which human is totally good or

<sup>55</sup>Kenneth M. Craig, Jr. “Rhetorical Aspects of Questions Answered with Silence in 1 Samuel 14:37 and 28:6.” *CBQ* 56 (1994): 221–239.

<sup>56</sup>A recent study explores inter-textual links from the three rebukes of Saul to the Shema of Deuteronomy 6, though it does not differentiate the third rebuke. Ming Him Ko, “Fusion-Point Hermeneutics: A Theological Interpretation of Saul's Rejection in Light of the Shema as the Rule of Faith,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 7.1 (2013): 57–78.

<sup>57</sup>Edward Smedley, *Saul at Endor: A Dramatic Sketch* (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1829), 57–58, n.15.

<sup>58</sup>E.g. Uriel Simon, “A Balanced Story: The Stern Prophet and the Kind Witch,” *Prooftexts* 8 (1988): 159–171. Pigott “Not So Wicked Witch.”

<sup>59</sup>She uses a more violent verb for this banishment (28:9) than the narrator does (28:3), clearly revealing her bias towards her craft and against Saul.

<sup>60</sup>Gnana Robinson, *Let Us Be Like the Nations: A Commentary on the Books of 1 and 2 Samuel*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 144.



evil? The medium is a mixture of motherly kindness and hard self-interest, of hospitality and cunning survival. Measured by objective outcomes, Saul actually leaves her presence worse than he came. He begins very afraid (28:5), twice calming her fears (28:9, 13), but after the encounter he is prostrated by fear and shaking (28:20, 25). So the kindness of the meal may be a cover for a death blow. Fokkelman, who praises the woman as a “mother figure,” sees that Saul receives the “invitation to surrender, to accept the truth that everything is over,”<sup>61</sup> and an “unrelenting damnation” that leaves Saul “trembling and totally shattered.”<sup>62</sup> So this encounter sends Saul out to battle believing a prophecy of his certain death, surely an influential factor in his choice to commit suicide. Many commentators believe Saul is fated to destruction, implacably doomed by God’s will: for example, Craig writes, “Saul’s asking is superfluous. . . . His fate has been decided long ago (13:14; 15:26).”<sup>63</sup> Many see the witch as delivering this verdict as mercifully as possible, providing spiritual palliative care and analgesia. Yet this view does not seem to account for the freedom allowed to characters in the text (e.g. 1 Sam 12:24–25). What if Saul had turned to Yahweh in repentance and faith, even at the eleventh hour? He could not have saved his kingship, but could he, perhaps by strategic withdrawal of his army, have avoided disaster for his sons, for Israel’s troops, even for himself? At least he could have gone to his death reconciled to God. In this light, the effect of the medium’s actions was to persuade him to give up on his ability to make moral choices, to repent, or to seek God’s kindness, and to prevent him from inspiring his army. Perhaps her war effort was gaining a psychological victory by emphasizing his guilt rather than speaking of grace and hope in God. This would make a successful covert operation against an old enemy of her craft. Saul leaves her house completely demoralised, and commits suicide the next day. So perhaps her hospitality is for self-preservation, her service for manipulation, and her motherly kindness for the destruction of a threat.

Reis further argues that feminist scholarship has wanted to make the woman a hero, but she reads here

a feminist statement in defence of the Bible’s evenhandedness. . . . When women are depicted . . . Scripture refreshingly eschews stereotypes. Contemporary feminist commentators treat women as victims or saints—valiant either way. Patronizing male exegetes have for centuries seen the witch of Endor as a womanly, albeit slightly ditsy, nurturer. The text, however, with gender-impartial objectivity sees her as intelligent and adept. . . . The author neither venerates the female nor condescends to the little lady.<sup>64</sup>

“The witch of Endor has cast a spell over biblical commentators,” quips Reis, so that for most scholars “God’s vehement condemnations of witchcraft

<sup>61</sup>Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, 622.

<sup>62</sup>Fokkelman, “Saul and David: crossed fates” *Bible Review* 5 no. 3 (1989), 20–32: 31.

<sup>63</sup>Craig, “Questions,” 235.

<sup>64</sup>Pamela Tamarkin Reis, “Eating the Blood: Saul and the Witch of Endor,” in *Reading the Lines: A Fresh Look at the Hebrew Bible* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 150.

are discounted . . . and the witch of Endor basks in approval, continuing to entrance exegetes down the centuries.”<sup>65</sup>

# 11. Does the narrator say Samuel appeared?

A number of commentators reason that the real Samuel must have appeared because the narrator tells us that Saul “knew” (NIV) or “perceived” (KJV) “that it was Samuel” (1 Sam 28:14), and then that “Samuel said to Saul” and “Samuel said” (28:15, 16). I submit that this is an example of focalization, the technique in which the narrator temporarily adopts the point of view of a character. It is well accepted among literary scholars that an otherwise omniscient narrator can put aside that privilege for a time to adopt “the perspective of one of the characters, and see ‘through his or her eyes.’”<sup>66</sup> Alter shows that *binneh* “(the familiar ‘behold’ of the King James Version) is often used to mark a shift in narrative point of view from third-person omniscience to the character’s direct perception.”<sup>67</sup> He notes:

The biblical narrator...often uses the term [*binneh*] to mark the crossover between his perspective and that of a character, the “Behold” becoming in effect part of the unspoken inner speech of the personage, especially at moments when something unexpected or untoward is seen.<sup>68</sup>

Weiss adds:

When the Bible speaks about the protagonists, it embodies . . . their state of mind, through the structure and style of the description. It is as if at that moment the Biblical author identifies with the actors in the story and speaks from their hearts and minds—not in their words, but in his own.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>65</sup>Reis, “Witch”, 4, 22.

<sup>66</sup>Jean Louis Ska, “Our Fathers Have Told Us . . .”: *Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 2000), 65-76. The term focalization comes from Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 161-211. Scholarly responses to Genette are summarised by D.F. Tolmie, *Jesus’ Farewell to the Disciples: John 13:1-17:26 in Narratological Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 173. See further application in Daniel Marguerat and Yvan Bourquin, *How To Read Bible Stories* (London: SCM Press, 1999), 72-76, 68. Other literary scholars treat the topic of focalisation in different words: “Viewpoints and Interpretations” in Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 129-85; “‘Point of View’ in Adele Berlin,” *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, United Kingdom: The Almond Press, 1983), 43-110. Further see Gary Yamasaki, *Perspective Criticism: Point of View and Evaluative Guidance in Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: James Clarke and Co, 2012).

<sup>67</sup>Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative, Revised and Updated* (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2011), 238, n.5.

<sup>68</sup>Robert Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (New York: Simon & Schuster/ Touchstone, 1989), 176-177

<sup>69</sup>Meir Weiss, *The Scriptures in Their Own Light: Collected Essays* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1987), 293-311. His example is Jacob’s morning surprise that *binneh*—lo and

A writer can show a character's views and perceptions either in that character's own words (direct speech) or in a focalized narration (free indirect speech), but the effect is very similar. Even if the character's views and perceptions are wrong, the dependable, reliable biblical narrator has the flexibility to use focalization when it suits a purpose, such as letting the reader enter a character's "mind and . . . secret motives or 'participate in the experience with the protagonist.'"<sup>70</sup> These shifts in point of view can be marked by the use of *hinneh* ("behold"),<sup>71</sup> but also "verbs of perception ('to see,' 'to hear,' 'to know') can be important indicators of specific focalizations," though "the context is decisive."<sup>72</sup>

This focalization technique is apparent elsewhere in 1 Samuel. For example, in 4:5-11 the Philistines *hear* a shout and *know* (verbs of perception) that a god has come into the camp, but in fact this is merely their perspective: it is not a god but the ark of Yahweh. In this case the narrator renders their perception by quoting their direct speech in contradiction of what he has told us really happened, but elsewhere the narrator also uses focalized narrations (free indirect speech) to reflect a character's perception. For example, in 1 Samuel 5 the narrator describes the idol of the Philistine god Dagon as if it were a person. The description adopts the perspective of the Philistines. The narrator tells us that they enter the temple and then the narration cuts (or focalizes) to their point of view: "and *hinneh* (behold, KJV), Dagon was fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of Yahweh! And Dagon's head and both the palms of his hands were broken off on the threshold. Only Dagon was left to him" (1 Sam 5:4<sup>73</sup>). Here a stone idol is described as if it were a living *'elohim* by a writer who does not actually think it is, but wants to imitate the Philistine point of view. The effect is to let the reader experience the consternation of the Philistines, in a way that mocks their god from within their religious paradigm.

Similarly, in the En-Dor scene the narrator first focalizes to the medium's point of view using a verb of perception: "And the woman *saw* Samuel" (28:12). No doubt that was her perception. Twice Saul asks what she sees, and twice she tells him, the second time zooming in on a detail that he asked about (28:13-14a). Then the narrator then focalizes to Saul using a verb of perception: "Saul *knew/perceived* that it was Samuel." A verb of seeing would not be appropriate because Saul did not see anything, but had to ask the

---

behold!—he was with Leah. The translated of the Hebrew original is from Walter Herzberg in "Traditional Commentators Anticipating A Modern Literary Approach," in *Boundaries of the Ancient Near Eastern World: A Tribute to Cyrus Gordon*, eds. Meir Lubetski, Claire Gottlieb and Sharon Keller (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 517-532.

<sup>70</sup>Ska, *Our Fathers*, 70, 76.

<sup>71</sup>For examples in Samuel, see Fokkeman, *The Crossing Fates*, 130, 158, 179, 204, 216, 218, 411, 533, 586, 632.

<sup>72</sup>Ska, *Our Fathers*, 68.

<sup>73</sup>Author's translation. The suffixes applied to Dagon are masculine singular.

woman what she saw (28:13-14), and his perception was provided by what she told him. For example, he identifies Samuel by her description of his clothing (28:14), which seems too trusting when Saul has just disguised himself using other clothing (28:8). Then, in Saul's perception, Samuel speaks to him, Saul answers, and Samuel speaks again. No doubt this is what he perceived to be happening, but then he fell to the ground and nothing more was exchanged.

The importance of this to the subject of our paper is that some narrations reflect the views and perceptions of the medium and of Saul, and should not be taken out of context as if they simply stated the view of the authoritative narrator. They should be read as part of an artful interplay of focalizations, with the medium's perceptions strongly influencing Saul's. Again, poor Saul is asking: *Sba'ul* has to *sba'al*.<sup>74</sup> The reader feels the force of the deception that destroyed Saul, which makes the story and its lesson even more dramatic and memorable.

## 12. Little ironies

This artful story abounds in little ironies which alert the reader, especially when taken together. As observed above, Saul complains to an apparition named as an *'elohim* that *'elohim* no longer speaks to him. He also takes an oath “as Yahweh lives”—while enquiring from the dead and from other gods, a strategy that is mocked in Isaiah 8:19-20: “why consult the dead on behalf of the living?” Saul also complains that God no longer speaks to him through prophets—but the complaint is to a supposed prophet who has just spoken to him (28:15). Saul's complaint uses a unique expression: by “the hand of prophets.” The apparent Samuel then takes up this saying like a rhetorical stick to beat Saul: God has done what he said by my hand, and torn the kingdom from your hand (28:17), and will give Israel, you, and the army into the hand of the Philistines (28:19, x2). In narrative context, Saul's complaint seems unfair. God has spoken to him through Samuel, through other prophets and through his own gift of prophecy (1 Sam 10). Saul has been among the prophets! And even when Saul became increasingly resistant, God makes Saul's men prophesy and even pours the gift of prophecy onto Saul himself (1 Sam 19:19-24).<sup>75</sup> When finally in chapter 28 God does not respond, it is because Saul has repeatedly ignored Samuel, has hunted away God's chosen messiah and thus the prophet Gad who seems to have defected to David (22:5), has killed the priests who used the ephod for reputable guidance (22:18) so that the one remaining priest brings that advantage to David,<sup>76</sup> has not sought the other prophets presumably still available (19:20), but who is now blaming God's non-communication rather than repenting and asking for mercy. Is Saul among the prophets? Not now. He is soon to be among the dead.

<sup>74</sup>Cf. Barbara Green, *King Saul's Asking* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press), 2003.

<sup>75</sup>Though the term here may also suggest mad raving.

<sup>76</sup>1 Sam 22:20-23; c.f. 23:2, 4; 30:8; 2:1; 5:19, 23

*Conclusion*

So the medium's worldview is not that of the author of Samuel or of orthodox Yahwism, but of the idolatrous neighbours of Israel. This dark and murky tale seems intended to make the audience feel and experience the deception of Saul, and to invite careful consideration of the subtle clues in the text to determine what is really going on. Within this story, the apparent Samuel speaks for the dark side and helps make Saul's downfall irrecoverable. Thus the story echoes timeless biblical warnings against necromancy as opposed to genuine prophecy.

We might say the devil is in the details.